

Performing Traditions In Franck's Organ Music: What Price 'Authenticity'?

By RJ Stove

Theoretically it should be possible to discuss the performing traditions in Franck's organ music without indulging in *ad hominem* reproofs. That it has so frequently been hard to do so is a phenomenon which springs from the peculiar role of Marcel Dupré: a role at first unquestioned, and later largely undefended.

Dupré dominated France's organ music from 1934 (the year Widor abandoned professional playing) until his own death in 1971 (which occurred within hours of his last public performance). None of Dupré's fellow French organists – even the most creatively significant of them, even Messiaen and Jean Langlais – could match his genius for public relations, whether as concert soloist, as church soloist, as prolific recording artist, or as administrator (in 1956 he left the Paris Conservatoire directorship only because he had reached the statutory retiring age). It followed that Dupré enjoyed something of an absolute monarch's cachet during the second half of his long and meritorious life. Accordingly his word on such matters as editorial procedures for organ music publication carried something like the force of law. This, in turn, ensured that after he died, occasional rivals brought to the task of censuring him the vigour of a delayed reaction.

His chief critic proved to be Langlais, whose letter in the September 1971 number of *The Diapason* (based in Illinois) sought to explain how his own views on Franck interpretation had been influenced by the three blind Franck pupils with whom he had himself studied: Albert Mahaut, Adolphe Marty, and Joséphine Boulay.¹ More acid-tongued was an interview Langlais gave in the same magazine's March 1975 issue, where he concentrated on publicising the legacy of Charles Tournemire, his immediate predecessor at Sainte-Clotilde, Franck's old church. Tournemire's 1930 recordings of Franck's *Pastorale*, *Cantabile*, and third *Choral* (all played on the same Sainte-Clotilde instrument which Franck had known) were not at all well remembered in 1975, save to cognoscenti. Langlais himself expressed reservations about how reliable these recordings were: 'I am absolutely convinced that Tournemire was very preoccupied with the short length of time available to him on the old 78 rpm discs. I am certain that Tournemire did not play this work [the *A minor Choral*] the same way the day before nor the day after!² Nevertheless, the freedom of rhythm and phrasing which Tournemire demonstrated on record met with Langlais's full approval, and Langlais took the opportunity to make various sharp reflections on Dupré's more constrained playing style, as well as, in particular, the 1955 edition

of Franck's complete organ music which identified Dupré as editor:

'Franck played his works very, very freely ... Now, what about Marcel Dupré? It is difficult for me to talk about him because he was my teacher at the same time that Messiaen was studying with him. That was in 1927 and he was a marvellous teacher. However, he did not play Franck correctly because he studied Franck with Widor and Guilmant. ...

'Dupré in his edition [of the *Pièce Héroïque*] calls for eight-foot foundations for both hands. This is an assassination! In addition, Dupré eliminates fermatas, removes many dynamic indications and changes the registrations. For me, this edition is a scandal.



César Franck

'Tournemire, on the other hand, studied with Franck ... Dupré played Franck very strictly. Ah, he played the notes magnificently, but did not play the spirit. Tournemire played both – the notes and the spirit.³

In 1975 the Tournemire discs remained so hard to obtain that most readers needed to take on trust Langlais' descriptions of them; but today, tracking down Franck recordings by both Dupré and Tournemire is a comparatively simple task. Both men's interpretations are readily available on compact disc (the latter's under the title *Charles Tournemire: Complete Recordings 1930-31*, on the Arbiter label), and they make for fascinating contrasts: Dupré's approach in even Franck's most heated passages being predominantly cool, 'classical,' fairly strict (though not metronomic) in pulse; Tournemire's much more obviously sensitive, 'Romantic,' rubato-laden, and generally rhetorical. Neither man tackled, or ever wanted to tackle, the entire Franck canon.

Compared with most modern players in this material, Tournemire seems amazingly free-and-easy, even if an early review of his *a minor Choral* record praised it for having 'permitted the music to speak for itself. There is an absence of deliberate interpretation, of atmosphere ...'⁴ (This suggests, almost incredibly to present-day ears, that Tournemire must have been *less* free-and-easy than the average Franck organist in 1930.) The fact that he happened to be using Franck's own instrument did not cramp his inventiveness. Quite the reverse. As Franck scholar Rollin Smith observes:

'The performer of today who frequently has to "turn the organ upside down" to obtain sounds that vaguely approximate those of a French organ will be astonished at Tournemire's disregard of Franck's registrational directions

...Tournemire observed Franck's dynamic markings little more than he does the original registrations.⁵

Besides, Tournemire is no more text-bound when it comes to speeds within a movement, on numerous occasions inserting his own *rallentandi*, at other times ignoring the *rallentandi* that Franck wanted. In an interpretative *reductio ad absurdum*, he even disregards the metronome markings for Franck's pieces that he himself recommends in his Franck biography: his performances being at times slower, at other times faster, than the biography advises. This all ensures – as does the obvious handicap, which even Langlais conceded, of 78 rpm recordings' side-length constraints – that for anyone less emotionally committed than was Langlais to upholding the Tournemire heritage, the notion that Tournemire represents 'authentic' Franck playing through having been a Franck student is extremely problematic. By a curious paradox, Dupré, who never met Franck and who had not yet reached his fifth birthday when Franck died, takes more trouble than Tournemire over Franck's verbal tempo indications.

Which is not to deny the shortcomings of Dupré's own Franck edition. Dupré himself seems to have had little to do with it. The four volumes of it were issued by the Bornemann imprint in 1955, when Dupré not only continued to maintain his taxing performance schedule but served as the Paris Conservatoire's director. 'Organists have not been slow,' as Dupré's biographer Graham Steed admits, "to point out errors and omissions in Dupré's work, of which, regretfully, there are a great number ... it lacks almost all of Franck's expression marks, as they are found in the original Durand edition, and there are innumerable departures from Franck's registration instructions."⁶ Steed plausibly conjectures that the time-poor Dupré secretly farmed

out the editorial tasks involved to a slapdash assistant. Thus, the watchword for any organist wishing to use the Dupré edition must be *caveat emptor*; but then, exactly the same could be said about Artur Schnabel's version of Beethoven's piano sonatas, or about many another publication far less roundly deplored over the years than the handiwork that appeared under Dupré's name.

The difference between Dupré's and Tournemire's styles in Franck can ultimately be recognized as part of the seemingly unending war between classicist and romanticist approaches to musical execution. We see the same phenomenon at work in the spectacular gap between the conducting approaches of Toscanini and Furtwängler. Dupré has something of Toscanini's reputation as a literalist, though in both the Frenchman's and the Italian's case this reputation is often enough belied by the recorded evidence; while in Tournemire's flexibility of phrasing and tempo we can discern, as Lawrence Archbold (music professor at Carleton College, Northfield, Minnesota) has pointed out, the same larger-than-life spirit which in Furtwängler – not least in Furtwängler's 1953 account of the Franck *Symphony* – is so clearly audible.⁷ An early twenty-first-century listener can surely be broadminded enough to appreciate the intrinsic worth of both organists' approaches, without undue positivist agonising over their 'authenticity.'

Further discrediting such worries has been the revelation, by French musicologist Joël-Marie Fauquet, of hitherto unsuspected metronome marks (in pencil, and in Franck's own handwriting) for the *Six Pièces*.⁸ According to these marks, Franck actually wanted this music to be taken substantially more swiftly than we are accustomed to hearing it: so swiftly that any student these days who attempted such quickness would inspire at best astonishment,

and at worst suspicions of drug use. All the markings are unexpected, but some seem nearly unbelievable. For instance, in the first and last sections of the *Prelude, Fugue and Variation* Franck calls for a brisk 72 dotted crotchets per minute (most conventional performances are closer to 60, and many are slower still).

Far from clarifying the situation, Fauquet's announcement complicates matters, and raises questions similar to those which have so long bedevilled scholarship as regards Beethoven's symphonies. From the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth, most conductors – following in Wagner's footsteps – assumed that Beethoven's metronome markings were impossibly fast, and probably attributable to the effects of deafness combined with a metronome mechanically erratic into the bargain. Only in the 1960s and 1970s did such conductors as Bernard Haitink and Georg Solti lead the way in maintaining (as Roger Norrington would later do, with, in his case, an orchestra playing on Beethoven-era instruments or copies thereof) that the markings were artistically tenable after all. Franck, of course, never went deaf; but it is a rare composer who does not have second thoughts about tempi once he hears a work in performance, and many a composer is happy to accept a trustworthy interpreter's differing views in this area, just as Franck himself willingly countenanced Eugène Ysaÿe's departures from the marked speed when it came to the *Violin Sonata's* opening passage.⁹ In any event, trustworthy interpreter or no trustworthy interpreter, it is entirely feasible that the speeds a composer actively opposes will turn out to suit the music better than the ones originally envisaged.

Happily, the sheer range of Franck organ *intégrales* on CD at present means that almost every conceivable taste in performing styles is catered for, from the vehement



yet purist virtuosity of the late Jeanne Demessieux, via the more atmospheric and meditative slant of the somewhat younger French artist André Isoir, to the iconoclastic – indeed almost totally off-the-wall – attitude of Jean Guillou, which sounds at least as much like Guillou as Franck. It would be a foolhardy music-lover who preferred any of these approaches to the others in every circumstance. A much greater temptation is to imitate the proverbial donkey who starved when forced to choose between equally delectable bales of hay.

NOTES

1. Jean Langlais, 'Letter to the Editor,' *The Diapason*, September 1971, p. 17.
2. Robert Sutherland Lord, 'The Saint-Clothilde [sic] Traditions – Franck, Tournemire and Langlais: Conversation and Commentary with Jean Langlais,' *The Diapason*, March 1975, p. 3.
3. Lord, 'Traditions,' p. 3.
4. Lawrence Archbold, "'We Have No Idea of the Liberty With Which

- Franck Played His Own Pieces": Early French Recordings of César Franck's A-Minor Chorale and the Question of Authenticity,' from Kerala J. Snyder (ed.), *The Organist As Scholar: Essays in Memory of Russell Saunders* (Stuyvesant, New York State, 1994), pp. 83-116, at p. 89.
5. Rollin Smith, *Toward an Authentic Interpretation of the Organ Works of César Franck* (Hillsdale, New York State, 2002), p. 104.
 6. Graham Steed, *The Organ Works of Marcel Dupré* (Hillsdale, New York State, 1999), p. 217.
 7. Archbold, 'We Have No Idea,' p. 116.
 8. Joël-Marie Fauquet, *César Franck* (Paris, 1999), pp. 950-951.
 9. Maurice Kunel, *César Franck inconnu* (Brussels, 1958), p. 105; Michel Stockhem, 'La Sonate de César Franck: interprétation et tradition,' *Revue Belge de Musicologie* (1991), pp. 145-152, at p. 147.

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